

Popular entertainment in the Victorian age drew heavily on sensational events of the day, and Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift provided one of the sensations of early 1879, probably rivalled only by the trial and execution of the murderous burglar Charley Peace. As we shall see later, the sensational death of the Prince Imperial caused a greater stir than any other incident in the Zulu war. Then, for the next three years an influx of Zulus, real and bogus, appeared in person to entertain the British public, who were further regaled by the arrival in 1882 of the most famous Zulu of all, King Cetshwayo himself.

The singers of comic, character and patriotic songs dominated the music halls, with which we are mainly concerned. Topical singers were a sub-species, their speciality being to sing songs, usually of their own composition, on the latest news of the day, or, if it had only just arrived, of the hour. One of these specialists was Charles Williams, and the reviewer of a London hall, when the news of Isandlwana had just arrived, commented that "his song concerning the sad disaster which befell our troops in Africa is an excellent composition, considering the time in which it was manufactured." (1) Similar praise was extended, two months later, to another well-known artiste, Bessie Bonehill, singer of the patriotic number, 'If England to herself remain but true'.

Into this Miss Bonehill on Tuesday evening introduced the following verse having reference to the joyful news that day received. It was hurriedly written by Mr. J.H. Jennings, and Miss Bonehill may be credited with extraordinary memory, seeing that within a few minutes of the time when it was placed in her hands she was singing it on the stage. It runs as follows:

The glorious news has been received,
That Pearson's noble band
Are safe; and by their comrades
Are greeted heart and hand.
The lesson taught these savages,
To revenge our glorious slain,
Must break their power; they'll never dare
To face our men again. (2)

The reader will already have gathered that there is little point in expecting the words of these songs to enrich English literature. Perhaps the nadir was reached some years later, when the young Vesta Tilley, whose fame was to last well into the twentieth century, physically draped herself in the Union Flag as well as sang about it. The flag was described as her "best friend", in a number which brought together the Crimean war, the Indian mutiny and Zulu war in a single verse:

This dumb campaigner never ran
From hellfire of the Russian,
He faced a swarm of sepoy's in
The horrors of Cawnpore;
And when Rorke's Drift held out against
Ten thousand blacks' concussion,
This ragged silk defied them and
Will do so evermore. (3)

The claim printed on the published version of this song, that Miss Tilley sung it "*with immense success*", appears to have been perfectly justified, and verses on this theme were usually "*enthusiastically received*", as the phrase went. The appeal was in the patriotism; and the songs sung in the immediate aftermath of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift were certainly patriotic. The two main themes were that the 24th Regiment were heroes, and that they had to be avenged:

The Zulus we're fighting for vengeance we cry;
We haven't arrived at the end.
These savages from our brave soldiers fly
Before we arrive at the end.
For their country and Queen the brave Twenty-fourth stood,
And defended the flag with their last drop of blood,
A monument speedily raise England should;
I haven't arrived at the end. (4)

Most of the songs quoted in this article covered a variety of topics; the Zulu theme was confined to one or two verses. However, it did sometimes take up entire songs, one of the most popular being *The Noble Twenty Fourth or Vanquished, Not Disgraced*.

A story came one morning,
From a far and distant land,
That savages had massacred
A small but gallant band.
'Gainst twenty thousand foreign foes,
Midst thunder, shot and shell,
Five hundred valiant English fought,
And nobly fighting fell...

The figures are rather strange, as are those given in the second verse:

And now we have to tell the tale
That ev'ry nation knows,
Five hundred British soldiers slew
Five thousand savage foes. (5)

Nevertheless, the point is clear, that British forces had conducted themselves as heroes against overwhelming odds. This was the perhaps natural reaction to the shock of unexpected defeat, which was also stirringly expressed in "The Gallant Twenty-Fourth or British Courage:

From Afric's shores a sad, sad story comes
That casts a blight on many English homes,
The news that England's sons, her hope and pride,
O'erwhelmed by numbers bravely fought and died... (6)

Music hall references to the Zulu war continued in much the same vein until late May 1879, when it was announced that Sir Garnet Wolseley was being sent to South Africa. The enthusiastic music hall support which he was to enjoy for the rest of his career begins at this point, and once again the topical singer Charles Williams was quick to react, not surprisingly as

Mr. Charles Williams has been for months telling his audience that the Government ought to send out Sir Garnet Wolseley to the Cape, and at last they have been compelled to do it. The Colonial Secretary will perhaps in future do what Mr. Williams suggests without such a lot of shilly-shallying. (7)

Wolseley was himself the hero of a popular song *Sir Garnet Will Show Them The Way*, which is worth quoting in full:

At last there's good news 'bout the war in Zulu,
Where so many brave lives have been lost,
We've gained by experience (dearly 'tis true)
And a lesson we've learned to our cost.
But the nation has heard the news with delight,
How brave Wolseley is now on his way,
To take command of our army out there,
And to win he will show them the way.

(Chorus) So hurrah! For Sir Garnet of glorious renown,
The brightest of jewels in England's great crown,
There'll be no more disasters and no more delay,
Sir Garnet's the man who will show them the way.

We all of us know how he won his great fame
By his skill and his courage true blue
On Red River 'tis said that he first made a name
And in Ashantee how his foe flew.
Tho' Lord Chelmsford no doubt is a brave honest man,
And Sir Bartle Frere too I dare say,
They've not led our soldiers to victory yet
But Sir Garnet will show them the way.

So with hearty good will, let us wish him God speed,
'Tis a mighty relief to us all
To know we've a man to depend on at need
Who will answer at duty's stern call.
From the flag of old England he'll wipe out the stain
And the Zulus for peace they will pray,
For the British will beat them again and again
And Sir Garnet will show them the way.

But alas once again comes a message of woe
How Prince Louis Napoleon was kill'd;
He was savagely stabbed by the merciless foe,
Like a soldier he fell on the field.
His poor noble mother with heart nearly broke
For ever we'll mourn that sad day,
But his death we'll revenge with a terrible stroke
And Sir Garnet will show us the way. (8)

This song has points of interest beyond its obvious patriotic inspiration. Although it clearly betrays impatience with Chelmsford and Frere, there is no criticism of the government. The pro-Conservative bias of the music halls was very strong, and it was unthinkable to criticise Disraeli, who was then Prime Minister. True, the war was started in South Africa rather than in London, but, had Gladstone been in power, that would not have saved him from attack.

Secondly, there was no question that the defeat had to be revenged. Within the next five years or so, Gladstone, after his return to power, was to add greatly to his unpopularity on the music halls by refusing to send an army to avenge either the defeat by the Boers at Majuba or the death of Gordon at the hands of the Sudanese.

The reluctance to cast blame over Isandlwana was influenced by the fact that the defeat was a blow to jingoism, a concept closely bound up with the music halls and with support for Disraeli's government. Disraeli had first become a hero for music hall singers and audiences less than two years earlier. In the Eastern crisis of 1877, it had looked as though he might take Britain to war against Russia, and the music halls, especially in London, had enthusiastically endorsed his belligerence. The most famous song on the subject "We don't want to fight, but by Jingo of we do", which was still fresh in everyone's memory, gave the word "Jingoism" to the language. The relevance of this to defeat by the Zulus was well expressed in *The Entr'acte*, a theatrical paper which kept aloof from the music hall's wilder enthusiasms:

For the last two years the Jingoists have been proclaiming and singing that the British lion has only to give signs of fighting to make the rest of the world tremble; and here we send out an army to fight a horde of savages, and the uneducated warriors outflank the English and demolish the whole force (9)

The paper went on to suggest that the overconfidence bred by Jingoism had contributed to the slaughter, and posed the intriguing question "What if there were a European war?"

The published texts of songs on topical subjects were by no means the only versions. As the news changed, verses were added or altered. News of the Prince Imperial's death probably became known, just in time for the last verse of "Sir Garnet..." to be added. This death probably received more attention on the halls than any other event of the Zulu war. The Prince Imperial has already been a celebrity in Britain for some years. A boy performer had been impersonating the young prince as early as 1872, (10) and, at a period when pieces of music were often named after celebrities, his portrait adorned the front cover of many published dances. In 1875 the copyright of "The Prince Imperial Galop" had been sold at auction for a record sum. When the blow fell, the music hall public was immensely taken by the romantic story of the young hero who had given his life for Britain, and by the grief of his beautiful widowed mother, living here in exile. One song on the subject was called "We Mourn with Eugenie or the Death of the Prince Imperial".(11) Another, "Zululand June 1st 1879", was sung by G.H. Macdermott, the immensely popular singer who had made the "Jingo" song famous. After the story of the prince's life had been told in some detail, the last verse runs:

With heart of trueborn chivalry, he sinks Imperial pride,
In England he has found true friends, and he'll fight on their side,
"Adieu", the Mother's heart nigh breaks, but he'll forth to the war,
Too soon to show his valour on "Africa's burning shore".
It will be long ere many an English Mother's tears be dried,
But all hoped the Prince a safe return to his widowed mother's side,
When savage foes with stealth draw near, the assegais up glance,
And falls the Prince we loved so well, "one day to rule o'er France. (12)

One reviewer commented, justly enough, “We cannot say that the song which relates to the late Prince Louis Napoleon is the best in Mr. Macdermott’s repertoire”. (13) He might have added that the chances of the Prince “one day ruling o’er France” had never been that strong, as the new French republic was being consolidated, and there was a faction wanting to bring back the Bourbons. A writer in the same paper had written a couple of months earlier, Now, you topical and Jingo vocalists, please do not insult nineteen out of every twenty respectable Frenchmen by pointing to the son of Napoleon III as the coming saviour of France, for such a suggestion savours of execrable taste...I gain some solace when I reflect upon the fact that most of the persons who cheer your will words don’t know the difference between a republic and a monarchy. (14)

However, references to the Prince continued to evoke cheers, although his name alone did not compensate for defects in the entertainment. At Crowder’s Hall in Greenwich, “Mr. T.F. Robins sings verses having reference to the *Gallant Twenty-Fourth*, *The Prince Imperial* and the *Princess of Wales*. The music, however, is not at all effective, and this fully accounts for a rather dull response.” (15)

War involved spectacle, and spectacle was the lifeblood of Victorian entertainment, so as early as April 1879, Astley’s amphitheatre on the south bank of the Thames, famous for its equestrian dramas, produced a spectacular show called *The Kaffir War*. A crowded and evidently a delighted audience enjoyed the excitement provided “by the appearance of Zulu hosts contending against British troops; by the smell of gunpowder, by hand-to-hand struggles, by patriotic songs and choruses, and, of course, by the triumphant victory of the British over their savage foes.” (16)

In Natal, the British victory was of course not then in sight, but in South London the entertainment would have been unthinkable without it. Love interest was provided by the hero, Lieutenant Daresdale, and a Moravian missionary girl, but clearly the fighting was the main attraction. The audience was shown “the Kaffir advance, the ambuscade, the hiding of the dusky warriors in the grass, the entrapping of Lieutenant Daresdale; his heroic defence of the colours of his regiment” etc. (17)

Apart from the fighting, the character of the Zulu King seems to have aroused most interest:

He is most imposing in appearance, and if Cetshwayo happens to be anything like him, we should at once declare that “the devil black”, who of late has been giving us some trouble, is not so black and so ugly as he has been painted by some of his artistic opponents...He addresses his dusky warriors in animated style, and then we get much dancing and drilling and war whooping, and some very effective groupings, in which curiously shaped shields and assegais play a conspicuous part.(18)

No attempt was made at Astley’s to pretend that the “Zulus” were anything but white men blacked up. However, the public would pay to see the genuine articles, and, inevitably, fakes appeared. “A troupe of real Zulu warriors in their native war manoeuvres” (19) was billed at London’s Metropolitan Music Hall, but one reviewer, at least, pronounced himself unimpressed “by the tedious programme gone through by a limited troupe of alleged Zulu warriors”. (20) Unfavourable audience reaction to these fakes was reported on a number of occasions. At Pinder’s Circus in Bridgwater, before about two thousand people sixty-two Zulu warriors were introduced, the Proprietor representing that after the Isandula affair they and others came to Natal, and placed themselves under the protection of the British flag. He added that one of them was formerly the chief of an impi, and understood several languages named by him. To test the accuracy of this statement he invited anyone present acquainted with these languages to question the chief.” (21)

A sailor who had been several times to the Cape tried his luck, and only got a shake of the head. The circus proprietor then denounced the sailor as an impostor. He replied that he had seen many Zulus and the so-called warriors were no more Zulus than the members of the audience were. A riot was only prevented by the “Zulus” being hastily called upon to start up an exhibition of their “mode of warfare”.

However, audiences warmed to the real thing. At the Star Music Hall in Liverpool, it was the Zulu singing which made the biggest impact:

Their natives songs must be heard to be appreciated; they would send even Wagner into a fit. The most remarkable is the song of exultation, which consists of a spasmodic solo...accompanied with a running refrain of the most melancholy description. (22)

The showman who had brought the Zulus over from Natal gave a running commentary on their act, which included wrestling and the use of the assegai, but was criticised for doing so with a gun over his shoulder, which made it seem as though the Zulus were under duress (23). The extent to which they were free agents is of course an interesting point, and there is no ducking the fact that the element of freak show, which the Victorians had not learned to deplore, was never far away. On the other hand, by their physique and their various skills, the Zulus inspired mainly admiring reactions.

The most famous showman to present Zulus to the public was G.A. Farini, but his first attempt to show them – at the Agricultural Hall in Islington – was blocked when the Home Secretary put pressure on the directors of the company controlling the hall. Such a spectacle, he was reported as saying, “*was not in consonance with the general feeling of the community.*” (24) One journalist interpreted this as meaning that the government did not want the public to be reminded of an overwhelming British defeat. And he added that these Zulus were fine fellows – “not

like the miserable specimens of humanity that have been recently seen at the music halls, who are supposed to have picked up at an East-end hospital.” (25)

St. James’s Hall and then the Royal Aquarium, and they were a great success. “A host of independent witnesses of high character” (26), including Sir Theophilus Shepstone (27) testified to their genuineness. Fittingly the entertainment ended with a song in which Shepstone was praised. (28) The Times had this to say:

“The Zulus are assembled into a company, and, instead of performing one or two commonplace feats, may be said to go through the whole drama of their life. Now they are seen at their meal, feeding themselves with enormous spoons, and expressing their satisfaction by a wild chant, under the inspiration of which they bump themselves along without rising in a sort of circular dance. Now the witch-finder commences his operations to discover the culprit whose magic has brought sickness into the tribe, and becomes perfectly rabid through the effect of his own incantations. Now there is a wedding ceremony, now a hunt, now a military expedition, all with characteristic dances; and the whole ends with a general conflict between rival tribes. In the songs and dances it is difficult to distinguish the expressions of love from the gestures of martial defence. Nevertheless as a picture of manners nothing can be more complete; and not the least remarkable part of the exhibition is the perfect training of the wild artists. They seem utterly to lose all sense of their present position; if English Actors could be found so completely to lose themselves in the characters they assumed, histrionic art would be in a state truly magnificent.” (29) The music hall song “Go and See the Zulus”, which was dedicated to Farini, although mainly comic, also reveals a certain amount of admiration:

*The rapid way they build their huts
Would make our builders stare.
Their active ways and native grace
Surprised me I declare.* (30)

At the St. James’s Halls, these Zulus mingled with the audience, being very kindly received, according to reports, especially by the ladies. (31) It was a unique opportunity for Victorian ladies to view a group of well-built men, wearing a minimum of clothing. “Go and See the Zulus” makes much of the interest taken by the singer’s wife. The partner includes the lines “my wife admired their costume. I could see nothing to admire except the portability, for you might wrap all the lot of clothing up in a page of the *Family Herald*”. The singer also has problems with Zulu names, viz.:

I’m very glad I took my wife
To see these wondrous men,
And she was quite delighted too,
But I was startled when
She remarked ‘twould give her joy
And true bliss without alloy
If we named out baby boy
After all the friendly Zulus. (32)

Scantly clad women seem to have been less common. The emphasis was on the men and their martial arts. However, objections were reported to Zulu women being photographed (33) (presumably because of their semi-nakedness), and by 1880 Farini was claiming to show three of Cetshwayo’s daughters, “Unolala, Unomadloza and Unozendbaba” as well as “the first and only Zulu baby ever brought to England, only eight months old”. (34)

Some light was shed on the terms under which Farini’s Zulus were engaged when the showman appeared at Westminster Police Court because five new additions to his troupe, one acting as interpreter, were trying to challenge the terms of their contract. Farini had agreed to pay each of them three pounds a month plus board and lodgings, under an agreement which allowed him always to keep one month’s salary in hand. They undertook to perform “where they said Farini should think fit”, and never to go out on the street without permission as this would be “detrimental to their being exhibited”. When this last point was raised, Farini said that they were taken out in carriages, and “allowed other exercise under proper control”. The magistrate told them that he could only urge them to act up to the agreement, which they seemed to have understood and signed. (35)

The whole arrangement is rightly distasteful to modern sensibilities. The racist element in the Victorian reaction to the Zulus is abhorrent. On the other hand, it was mixed with a sense of fair play. The reception of the “friendly Zulus” was itself friendly, at a time when Britain was at war with their people, and, when they first appeared, the initial British defeat had not been reversed. Clearly the spectators felt a pleasant feeling of superiority to these technologically backward people who provided entertainment for them, but the goodwill also derives from the feeling that Britain should not have been fighting them in the first place, and that victory, when it came, would be nothing to be very proud of. Even on the jingoistic music halls, this feeling was common enough:

Said Paul unto Peter, the world’s going wrong.
Even England wants that which to her don’t belong.
The Afghans, the Zulus have been made to fall.
Is this Christian conduct? Said Peter to Paul. (36)

Eventual victory over the Zulus appeared so certain, that, when it came, it did not arouse the general elation usually associated with the winning of a war. On the other hand, what had only been imagined at Astley's could now be presented as historical fact. Perhaps the most popular version was "a new military spectacle" entitled "Ulundi" performed as part of the bill at a number of London music halls by 250 (or according to other advertisements 300) "highly trained" children. In the first scene, the troops were seen embarking at Portsmouth. The second showed "a well painted view of the bush in Zululand", where the British troops could be heard singing "Just before the battle, mother". The last depicted the "wild extent of country" where the battle of Ulundi took place with flashes of fire, columns of smoke, the crack of guns and the roar of canon. "The combatants rush at each other, many fall and finally, the British, with hearty cheers, show and congratulate themselves they have gained the victory." (37) At one hall this was all preceded by a rhymed prologue, delivered by the chairman, made up as a Chelsea pensioner with a wooden leg and a shade over one eye! (38)

The response to the capture of Cetshwayo often shows the music halls in a poor light. There were a great many jokes about his wives and his nakedness. There are suggestions that he too could be put on display. On the other hand, although this is certainly deplorable, the context is one in which British politicians like Gladstone received equally rough treatment. Nor is fair play entirely absent:

Farini would like him, and so would Tussaud's,
But he fought for his country as everyone knows,
And Britons don't trample on brave foreign foes. (39)

This attitude was shared by the music hall and theatrical press, which in its leader columns tended to praise Cetshwayo as a brave adversary. As suggested in the song, Madame Tussaud's, like other waxwork exhibitions around the country, did show a likeness of him. It was still on display (along with models of his wives) in 1886 – next to an image of Sir Bartle Frere; (40) by 1890 they had both been replaced. The Tussauds catalogue stated that Cetshwayo was defeated and deposed "after a prolonged and gallant resistance".

Naturally when Cetshwayo came to Britain in 1882, there was a new spurt of interest. However, it has left little behind in the way of printed music hall material. It must be remembered that the topical references which survive are a small proportion of those which have been lost for ever – because the songs were never printed, or the jokes and asides were never recorded in the press. However, two one-act farces were licensed by the Lord Chamberlain in July 1882. In "Cetshwayo at Last", Bloggs – described as "a retired winkle boiler" – is obsessed with royalty and refuses to let his daughter marry her sweetheart because he is a commoner. To teach him a lesson, a friend of the young couple, who works in a laundry, blacks up as the Zulu chief with some of the laundry girls acting the part of his wives. They cause complete havoc, and manhandle Bloggs until he agrees to let the wedding take place. In *The Zulu Chief* the father is again an obstacle to true love; however, he is obsessed not with royalty but with Cetshwayo himself. Once again a supposed Cetshwayo appears, but is revealed as a joker who has blacked up. Sally the maid, who does not get on with her mistress, is given the lines "Talk about Zulus being savages. We have worse here. Missus is one, only she has more clothes on in the day time". I have not been able to trace a production of either of these farces. If they were never produced, it would be no loss to the stage. Their interest lies in the theme of what is described as "Zulu mania". In both cases the excitement caused by Cetshwayo's arrival is made the object of satire, a sure sign that it was remarkable and widespread. (41)

After this, music hall interest in the Zulu war flagged, but it revived again to an extent in the 1890s, when any imperial theme was popular. Leo Dryden, who specialised in patriotic and military material, delivered a "musical monologue" called *A Military Blunder* – the blunder being Lord Chelmsford's. The first scene depicted the battlefield in South Africa: in the second, the old soldier was seen as a timekeeper at a factory, remembering what had happened. (42) At about the same time a ballad singer, Frank Celli, sang a song called *Rorke's Drift* dressed in the uniform of the Twenty-Fourth Regiment. As the words are very like those of fifteen years earlier, further quotation is unnecessary. More interesting is the fact that Celli appeared in front of a tableau representing a painting of Rorke's Drift by an artist called de Neuville. (43) Tableaux depicting well-known paintings or sculpture were a feature of music hall performances. Also in the nineties, an act called Maynard and Calver appeared as Coghill and Melvill in *Dying to Save the Queen's Colours*. (44)

One theme of a different order remains to be discussed. The people who wrote and staged music hall entertainment knew nothing of South Africa or what it was like to fight in battle. All they knew of the Zulus was that they gleaned from the newspapers and what could be learned from the new phenomenon of Zulus appearing in Britain to perform. However, they did know and cared deeply about the British soldier. The soldier was part of the audience, in some halls an important part. Although the politics of the music hall were suspicious of anyone who wished to disturb the status quo, including would-be union leaders, stress was laid on the working conditions of ordinary people. Ever since the music hall had begun in the 1850s, the lot of the common soldier, and in particular the fact that he could be flogged to near death at the whim of an officer, was a recurrent theme. It was a theme to which the Zulu war gave a new relevance. In 1879 and 1880 the flogging of troops during that campaign led to renewed attempts to abolish the practice and a new spate of songs in support of abolition:

Discussion is rife with wordy strife,
On the "Army Closing Bill",
As though our British soldier's blood

With whips 'twere right to spill.
Good men to flog like ass or dog
Disgusts true Britons rather...
To flog men who fight for the Queen isn't right,
So don't let it go any farther. (45)

Or even more savagely,
Why should they wish the brave soldier to flog,
Cutting and hacking his back like a log,
Treating a man much worse than a dog! (46)

To romanticise the music hall is to misrepresent it. As we have seen, it could be harsh, unfeeling, racist, xenophobic, coarse and ignorant. On the other hand, one also finds a genuine feeling for the poor, the disadvantaged and the underdog. Sometimes – although less often than it should have been – this feeling was extended to the Zulus.

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